

Peer Coaching: Changing Classroom Practice and Enhancing Student Achievement

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Why Peer Coaching?

Over the last fifteen years, a growing number of educators have come to the conclusion that the workshop and conference format that make up most staff development is ineffective. Teachers say that traditional professional development doesn't offer the sustained opportunities for collaboration, feedback, and reflection they need to change their classroom practice. At the same time, a different methodology for professional learning has emerged. Richard (2003) notes that more and more schools across the country are replacing traditional staff development with school-based staff developers. Boston and San Diego School Districts are pioneers of this method of preparing teachers, but they are just two examples of the dozens of school districts that have adopted peer coaching as a model for school-based staff development. The reasons for this shift are clear; research on effective staff development shows that a peer coaching methodology meets teachers' needs and is effective at shaping classroom practice.

Researchers have noted that workshops that comprise most traditional staff development methodologies don't provide sufficient time, activities, or content necessary to promote meaningful change (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). Study results by Joyce and Showers (1996, 2002) show that fewer than 15% of teachers implement new ideas learned in traditional staff development settings such as workshops. The problem with these traditional approaches is that teachers often don't have the skills or knowledge needed to apply what they learn in these workshops and have no way to receive support or feedback when they do attempt to apply what they have learned. Teachers need time to see new strategies modeled during the school day and opportunities to use new skills in developing and implementing learning activities (Garet, et al., 2001; Joyce and Showers 1996, 2002; Rodriguez and Knuth, 2000).

As they have studied the impact of traditional professional development, many researchers have identified the characteristics of effective staff development, and their findings are remarkably consistent. Alexander Russo (2004) summarized these research findings in a recent article. Effective staff development must be "ongoing, deeply embedded in teachers' classroom work with children, specific to grade levels or academic content, and focused on research-based approaches. It also must help to open classroom doors and create more collaboration and sense of community among teachers in a school" (para. 8).

Russo noted that school-based coaching not only met these criteria "remarkably well," it is consistent with the standards for effective staff development outlined by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC). For more than a decade the National Staff Development Council has studied the research on professional development with the goal

of improving the quality of teachers' professional development. The NSDC has outlined standards for effective professional development based on its analysis of the research. In reviewing the NSDC's standards, Russo noted coaching aligned with many of them. In particular, he noted coaching "...is focused on authentic student work, is closely tied to specific school or district's curriculum and to teachers' practice, takes place on a continuous basis, and relies heavily on research" (para. 9).

Does peer coaching affect academic achievement?

While peer coaching may be an effective model of staff development, many educators are asking hard questions about peer coaching and academic achievement. Does peer coaching actually affect student learning? Does it produce increases in academic achievement? There are increasing indications that coaching can affect academic achievement.

- Richard (2003) notes that coaching, which was part of a broader package of reforms, was producing test score improvements in the San Diego School District.
- Guiney (2001) looked at the impact of literacy coaching in Boston Public Schools and concluded that, "Several schools have had dramatic increases on parts of the state's difficult test, the MCAS [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System]—increases that can be directly connected to teachers' work that was undertaken with their coaches" (para. 12).
- Branigan (2002) concluded that Missouri's eMINTS program, which combines computer technology, an inquiry-based approach to teaching, and extensive professional development, including coaching, produced impressive results in students who took the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) test. "Results show that a higher percentage of students in eMINTS classrooms scored in the 'Proficient' or 'Advanced' categories...when compared with other students who took the MAP tests..." (para. 18).

Despite these promising findings, a recent study of peer coaching by Neufeld and Roper (2003) found that there is no conclusive evidence that coaching alone produces increases in academic achievement. Despite the lack of clear proof that coaching leads to increased academic achievement, Neufeld and Roper were quick to point out that "...coaching does increase the instructional capacity of school and teachers, a known prerequisite for increasing learning" (p. v). Their conclusion is shared by many leading researchers in the field.

Does peer coaching affect teacher practice?

Research findings indicate that school-based peer coaching plays an important role in improving teachers' abilities to adopt and implement new teaching and learning practices. When comparing teachers who had worked with coaches with those who had not, Showers and Joyce (2002) found that teachers who worked with coaches:

- Practiced new strategies more often and with greater skill than teachers who were not coached.
- Retained and increased their new skills over time; teachers who were not coached did not.
- Demonstrated a clearer understanding of the purposes and uses of the new strategies than teachers who were not coached.

These same researchers also found that when teachers combined participation in traditional workshops with peer coaching or methodologies that promoted collaboration and reflection, more than 80% of teachers were using newly learned strategies in their classrooms (Joyce and Showers, 1996; Joyce, Murphy, & Showers, 1996; Richardson, 1999).

Over time, research had made it increasingly clear that one key to changing classroom practices is to provide teachers with opportunities for ongoing discussion and reflection. Methodologies that provide teachers with these chances for collaboration change teaching practice (Darling-Hammond, 1995, 1996; Garet et al., 2001; Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992; Little, 1993; Loucks-Horsley, Stiles, & Hewson, 1996; Richardson, 1994; Sparks and Loucks-Horsley, 1989; Richard, 2003; Showers and Joyce, 2002; Veenman and Denessen, 2001). Coaching is one methodology that encourages this type of professional collaboration. Teachers value coaching because it promotes their learning by offering them opportunities to become involved in meaningful discussions and planning, observing others, being observed, and receiving feedback (Carey and Frechtling, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Loucks-Horsley et al., 1998). Garet and several co-authors (2001) found that teachers from the same school who work together with coaches have more opportunities to “discuss concepts, skills, and problems that arise during their professional development experiences” and are “likely to share common curricular materials, course offerings, and assessment requirements” (p. 922).

Does peer coaching help teachers effectively integrate technology into classroom practice?

The peer coaching methodology has an impact on teaching practices in a variety of content areas, and also plays a powerful role in helping teachers integrate technology into their classroom learning activities. Teachers needed ongoing support as their proficiency in integrating technology into instruction grew. While teachers initially rely heavily on technical support, they need instructional support as they begin to use technology to support project based learning or interdisciplinary learning (White, Ringstaff, & Kelley, 2002). Peer coaching can provide the type of support teachers need as they begin to integrate technology with classroom activities that actively engage students in learning (Ike, 1997; Miller, 1998; Norton and Gonzales, 1998; Saye, 1998; Tenbusch, 1998; Yocam, 1996). One reason peer coaching is so useful for technology integration is that it provides both ongoing support and just-in-time support that teachers value (Brush et al., 2003).

Conclusion

While peer coaching is slowly finding its way into American schools, we have enough experience with this methodology to know that it is a proven technique which can change teacher practice. Experience with this form of professional development shows us the building blocks that need to be in place to make it successful. Like any other professional development methodology, coaching won't be successful unless it is closely aligned with the school's educational goals, budget, and other resources. If it is "integral to a larger instructional improvement plan that targets and aligns professional development resources toward the district's goals," Neufeld and Roper (2003) concluded that, "coaching can become a powerful vehicle for improving instruction, and, thereby, student achievement" (p. 26). Peer coaching is a cost-effective way for schools and school districts to meet their needs.

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